

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Washington, D.C. –Today, July 9, 2013, marks the second anniversary of South Sudan’s independence from Sudan. It is a day of celebration for millions of Southerners who fought for human rights and religious freedom in Sudan’s 20 year civil war. However, July 9 also is a reminder that for two years an estimated 500,000 Southerners in Sudan have been stateless and living a precarious existence.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is deeply concerned that the failure to resolve the status of stateless Southerners who are living in the north risks further undermining religious freedom in Sudan. With the independence of South Sudan, senior Sudanese government officials have called for a more comprehensive and rigid application of Sharia law in Sudan, where southerners who are Christian have been subject to a range of religious freedom violations. In particular, there have been credible reports of the destruction of churches, refusal to permit construction of new churches and other forms of intimidation and harassment. USCIRF strongly believes that the independence of South Sudan must not be used as a justification for the denial of religious diversity and freedom in Sudan, or as a justification to delay progress on a resolution of the status of southerners in Sudan.

“It is a potential recipe for disaster that after more than two years of discussions, half a million Southerners in Sudan remain stateless and vulnerable to severe religious freedom violations. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) calls on the

U.S. government and its allies to increase their efforts to help Sudan and South Sudan resolve the status of their nationals residing in the other's territory," said USCIRF Chair Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett. "Southerners in Sudan are at a particularly grave risk. Furthermore, failure to finalize negotiations has left them vulnerable to expulsion."

Since January 2011, the two countries have engaged in a series of negotiations over the citizenship and legal status of Southern Sudanese in Sudan and Sudanese in South Sudan. While South Sudan has offered citizenship to Sudanese residents, the Government of Sudan (GoS) has not reciprocated.

In September 2012, the two countries each agreed to establish a Joint High Level Committee that would negotiate the status and treatment of their nationals. Future negotiations were to focus on providing freedom of residence, movement, economic activity, and property. However, no progress has been made.

"It is imperative that the Joint High Level Committee not only fully resolves specific areas of concern from prior agreements, but also ensures that the final agreement includes an explicit protection from statelessness and respect for universal human rights, including religious freedom," said Chair Lantos Swett.

Since South Sudan's independence, the GoS frequently has violated the rights of Southerners. In addition, South Sudanese humanitarian workers employed at Christian

organizations were arrested, accused of illegal Christian proselytization, and deported to South Sudan in 2012 and 2013. The GoS also has fired all Southerners employed in government and stripped Sudanese citizenship from those who could access South Sudanese citizenship, and called on them to return to South Sudan.

Southerners living in Sudan were internally displaced from the North-South civil war. Some have chosen to remain in Sudan for reasons including that they grew up in Sudan, are married to a Sudanese individual, or have integrated into the country economically or in other ways. Others remained because South Sudan currently is unable to absorb returnees and provide them with services such as education or health care.